

DOMESTIC ABUSE IN LATER LIFE*

Prevalence and Incidence

How many older people are being abused? What percentage of older people has been abused, neglected, battered or sexually assaulted in their lifetime (prevalence)? How many are abused each year (incidence)?

Understanding how many victims have been harmed or are currently being hurt is critical to practitioners and funders who are designing services and interventions. This paper will examine research that focuses on prevalence (extent of the problem) and incidence (rate of occurrence) of domestic abuse in later life.

This series of papers** defines domestic abuse in later life as male and female victims, age 50 and older, abused by someone in a trusted, ongoing relationship like a spouse/partner, family member, or caregiver. The victims lived primarily in the community, not institutions (e.g., nursing homes). Studies from the United States and Canada were included.

ARTICLES REVIEWED

Ten articles published between 1988 and 1999 were reviewed for this article.

Author(s) Pub. Date	Sample size and demographics	Type(s) of abuse covered [§]	Selected finding(s) (page number/s in parentheses)
Hudson and Carlson 1999 (a)	424 Caucasians, 318 African Americans, and 202 Native Americans aged 40+ (mean age 62) residing in six N. Carolina counties	Elder abuse (not including neglect)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 7.5% of 452 answering had been abused since turning 65. (195)• 19.1% of the 930 who answered said they had been abused at some time in their lives. (195)• 6.2% of 917 answering said they had abused an elder. (195)
Hudson, et al 1999 (b)	Interviews of 944 community dwelling persons in NC ages 40 – 93 years old. 424 White	“Elder mistreatment: destructive behavior that is directed toward an older adult,	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Been abused at some time in life:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ White Americans 18%○ Native Americans 25.5%○ African Americans 16.6%○ Total 19.1% (924)• Ever abused another person

*This series of articles is dedicated to Dr. Rosalie Wolf, internationally renowned researcher on elder abuse and domestic abuse in later life. We miss her gentle guidance, wisdom, and dedication to elder victims.

♦ This article is part of a series of papers examining research on domestic abuse in later life. To link to the other articles, see the note at the conclusion of this paper.

* For a chart with a more detailed description of the different definitions of abuse, go to the National Center on Elder Abuse website at www.elderabusecenter.org.

	Americans; 318 African American; and 202 Native Americans. Half of the sample was aged 40-64, half 65+. Half were female, half male.	occurs within the context of a relationship connoting trust and is of sufficient intensity and/or frequency to produce harmful physical, psychological social and/or financial effects of unnecessary suffering, injury, pain, loss, and/or violation of human rights and poorer quality of life for the older adult.” “Elder abuse: aggressive or invasive behavior/action(s) or threats of same, inflicted on an older adult and resulting in harmful effects for the older adult.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White Americans 6.7% ○ Native Americans 8.1% ○ African Americans 4.3% ○ Total 6.2% (924) ● Abused after age 65 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White Americans 7.7% ○ Native Americans 4.3% ○ African Americans 9.2% ○ Total 7.5% (924) ● Ever abused an elder <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ White Americans 3.6% ○ Native Americans 1.5% ○ African Americans 0.3% ○ Total 2.0% (924)
Mouton 1999	257 women ages 50 – 79 who participated in the Women’s Health Initiative in Newark, New Jersey	Physical assault or threat of assault by a spouse/partner or “someone important to you”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 31.9% (82) had experienced domestic physical assault or threat at some time in their lives. (1175) ● Thirty-one (15%) had been physically assaulted; 51 (22.6%) had been physically threatened. (1175) ● Of those experiencing assault/threat, 11 (4.3%) were currently in an abusive relationship. (1176)
NCEA National Elder Abuse	APS and local “sentinel” reports of abused and neglected	Physical, sexual, emotional or psychological abuse; neglect,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Estimates 449,924 persons, aged 60 and over, experienced abuse and/or neglect in domestic settings in 1996. (Standard error suggests 210,900 to

Incidence Study 1998	persons age 60+ from 20 counties in 15 states in U.S.	abandonment, financial exploitation	688,948.) (4) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Only 21% of cases are reported to and substantiated by APS agencies. (4)
Lachs, et al 1997 (a)	2,812 adults 65 and older from a stratified sample of residence types in CT	Physical abuse, neglect, and exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 47 (1.6%) elders had been abused, neglected, or exploited within a nine-year period. (471)
Harris 1996	5168 couples from 1985 U.S. Family Violence Resurvey, two groups: ages 19-59 (4476) and 60+ (842)	Physical violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18.2% of couples under age 60 and 5.8% of couples aged 60+ experienced physical violence in their relationship within the past year. (13) “More than half of the older respondents reported that spousal abuse began more than 10 years ago. 40% of this group reported the first incidence of violence occurred 25 or more years ago.” (19)
Pittaway 1993	605 adults aged 55-100 who accessed health and social service organizations in London, Ontario during a 3-month period	Physical abuse (including sexual abuse), chronic verbal aggression, material abuse (actual and attempted), and neglect (intentional and unintentional)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “The overall prevalence rate for all forms of abuse, physical, chronic verbal aggression, attempted and actual material abuse, is 31.9%. For intentional and unintentional neglect, it is 16.4%.” (89) “Just over a quarter (28.3%) of the sample, [sic] reported at least one form of physical violence over the lifetime.” (84)
Podnieks 1992 (a)	Random sample telephone survey of 2008 persons 65+ living in the community in Canada	Physical and psychological abuse, neglect and financial exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Estimated 98,000 – 137,000 elders abused in Canada.” (48) “40 persons per 1,000 elderly population recently experienced some serious form of maltreatment at the hands of a partner, relative, or significant others.” (5)
Brown 1989	Random sample of 37 Southwest reservation-dwelling Navajo aged 60+, and their family members	Neglect, psychological and physical abuse, and financial exploitation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 59.4% of sample had experienced at least one form of abuse [time frame unspecified]. (24)
Pillemer and	Random sample of 2020 persons	Physical assault, psychological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Estimates between 701,000 and 1,093,560 abused elders in the nation.”

Finkelhor 1988	aged 65+ in Boston, MA; 63 cases of elder abuse found	abuse, and neglect	(54). • Rate of 32 maltreated elderly per 1,000. (53)
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GENERALIZED FINDINGS

Three categories of findings emerged from these studies: abuse in later life; abuse over the life span; and incidence of domestic elder abuse. Two studies examined abuse in later life by asking older participants if they were currently experiencing abuse. Mouton (1999) found that 4.3% were currently in an abusive relationship. Harris (1996) found that 5.8% of older couples had experienced domestic violence in the past year. A third study that examined APS records found that 1.6% of elders had been abused, neglected, or exploited over a nine year period (Lachs, 1997a). Hudson (1999b) found that 7.5% of surveyed elders had been abused at some point after turning 65. Hudson and Carlson (1999a) found that 6.2% of adults stated that they had abused an elder in one study, and 2.0% had in a second (1999b) study.

Five studies asked questions about abuse occurring at any point across the lifespan. A range of 19.1% - 59.4% of older participants acknowledged that they had been abused or sexually assaulted at some time in their life (Hudson, 1999a and b; Mouton, 1999; Pittaway, 1993; Brown, 1989).

Three studies attempted to estimate the incidence of abuse against elders. Two studies, one in the United States and one in Canada, are more than nine years old. In 1988, Pillemer and Finklehor estimated 701,000 – 1,093,560 older Americans are victims of abuse each year (Pillemer, 1988). In the early 1990's, Podnieks estimated 98,000 – 137,000 older Canadians are elder abuse victims each year (Podnieks, 1992a). These figures lead to estimates that 32 out of every 1,000 elders in the United States are abused per year and 40 elders per 1,000 in Canada. More recently, the National Center on Elder Abuse commissioned a National Elder Abuse Incidence Study (NEAIS), which estimated approximately 450,000 older people were being abused in 1996 (NEAIS, 1998).

LIMITATIONS OF STUDIES

The NEAIS estimate of incidence of domestic elder abuse is significantly lower than previous studies. The study's authors acknowledge that this estimate may be low because the study was designed not to determine how much elder abuse exists but rather to look at the proportion of cases reported to adult protective services versus the proportion of cases seen. The study estimated only 21% of cases are reported to and substantiated by adult protective services (APS) agencies. The researchers recognized and stated in the study that using substantiated APS cases and community sentinels (trained volunteers to look for elder abuse) does not include the large (but unmeasured) segment of elders that are isolated and do not come in contact with community services (Cook-Daniels, 1999; Otto & Quinn, 1999).

In addition, the sample size for the NEAIS was extremely small. Only 20 counties in 15 states were used. In each county only 12 –13 agencies were included and each agency had

typically only four – six trained sentinels. The data was only collected for two months based on 1,498 actual cases (Cook-Daniels, 1999; Otto & Quinn, 1999).

Even with the methodological flaws, NEAIS does provide some useful information. The study confirmed the usefulness of training professionals to improve awareness and recognition of elder abuse. The study also provides the most far-reaching confirmation that reported cases of elder abuse are only a fraction of those elders being harmed, neglected or exploited (Cook-Daniels, 1999).

In addition to the problems specific to NEAIS, numerous limitations in the research on abuse in later life were found. In part because of the lack of financial resources, only a few studies have been large (more than 1,000 respondents) random sample studies (Lachs 1997a; Podnieks, 1992a; Pillemer, 1988). Even these large studies ultimately based their conclusions on relatively small numbers of abuse victims, ranging from 47 to 80. Only one of the random sample studies included cognitively impaired elders (achieved by interviewing other family members), but using the reports of proxies is considered unreliable (The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2001).

All the other studies had serious sampling biases because they were based on elders who were using services of some sort and/or were known to adult protective services or domestic violence programs. This is problematic, because it is clear that many abused elders are isolated and do not come to the attention of professionals or seek help. With one exception (Otiniano, 1998), these studies also involved relatively small samples – 10 to 401, with the majority being under 100. Respecting the confidentiality and safety of victims creates problems with many scientific methods. Very few studies used control groups.

In addition, some elders deny that what they are experiencing is abuse (see, for example, Phillips, 2000), introducing another source of underreporting. Perhaps more importantly, studies have shown that elders' definitions of abuse do not always correspond to professionals' definitions, which may confound findings.

Comparing results across studies is practically impossible. These studies varied widely in: the types of abuse studied, the specific definitions of the types of abuse studied; whether abuse was self-reported or from agency records; the age of respondents (which ranged all the way down to 40); whether the target audience was predominately healthy elders or vulnerable adults; and whether only women or men and women were included.

POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS

Too few studies have been done on incidence and/or prevalence of domestic abuse in later life to give us a clear picture of the numbers of older victims currently experiencing abuse and neglect or how many older people have experienced abuse or sexual assault in the past. The field would benefit from replication of random-sample studies, such as those done by Pillemer and Podnieks, to examine current trends. A national incidence study, adequately funded and designed to better establish incidence by overcoming the obstacles encountered by the NEAIS, would be extremely beneficial.

The existing research supports what practitioners know: too many older people are being harmed or neglected by people they know and care about. Many of these victims are not getting help to live safely. Service providers are only seeing the “tip of the iceberg” when it comes to elder abuse.

Finally, it is time to recognize and study the impact of past trauma and abuse for this population. Post traumatic stress could be the result of abuse, war experience, migration acculturation for immigrants, or other trauma. Post-traumatic stress research should also examine potential connections between past trauma and self-neglect, chronic physical illnesses, substance abuse, depression, mental illness and some forms of dementia. This research could help practitioners understand if services that focus on healing from past trauma might be helpful for some abused older persons.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Cook-Daniels, L. (1999) Interpreting the National Elder Abuse Incidence Study. *Victimization of the Elderly and Disabled*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1-2+.

Otto, J and Quinn, K. (1999) The National Elder Abuse Incidence Study: An Evaluation by the National Association of Adult Protective Service Administrators. *Victimization of the Elderly and Disabled*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 4+.

For a list of research questions on elder abuse and domestic abuse in later life, go to <http://www.elderabusecenter.org/research/agenda.html>.

For other articles in this series (ADD LINKS TO OTHER 8 ARTICLES).

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